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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 001008

SIPDIS

NEA/ARP,

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TAGS: PINR PHUM PTER IR KU

SUBJECT: IRANIAN DISSIDENT CLAIMS TO HAVE INFORMATION ON
MISSING ISRAELI PILOT RON ARAD

REF: KUWAIT 151

Classified By: Political Counselor Peter O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary

¶1. (S) Iranian cleric and rights activist Shaykh Ahmed Eidan Neisi (protect), in one of his periodic visits to Kuwait, told Poloff that he had information on the whereabouts of missing Israeli pilot Ron Arad that he was willing to share in exchange for money. He claimed that Arad is still alive and is being held by a "high-level intelligence branch" in Tehran. Neisi was unable to offer more than anecdotal evidence to support his story, which hinges on an unnamed Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) official. Neisi also discussed with poloff his views on the continued persecution of the Ahwazi Arabs at the hands of the "Khomeini-esque Ahmadinejad regime." End summary.

"IRGC Knows Whereabouts of Ron Arad"

¶2. (S) Ahmad Eidan Neisi, an Iranian Shi'a cleric and Ahwazi Arab human rights activist who has been a periodic embassy contact when in Kuwait (reftel), told Poloff in a September 15 meeting that he had "precise information" on the current whereabouts of missing Israeli pilot Ron Arad. Without elaborating, he said that the information was worth USD 50,000 and was gleaned from a well-placed and trusted Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) contact. Poloff offered no monetary incentive, but agreed to meet with Neisi in a private meeting to hear his account of Arad.

¶3. (S) In a subsequent meeting on September 18 where no LES translators were present -- per Neisi's request -- Neisi admitted that he did not himself know where Ron Arad was, but he was convinced that a contact of his in the IRGC did. He claimed he had developed a close friendship with the source, whom he described as a very old, non-uniformed, IRGC official in charge of airport security in Tehran. Neisi stated that in his capacity as an Imam, he had certain privileges not accorded to non-clergy in Iran, and this contact had regularly provided him with free train tickets and helped him to bypass security checks.

Arad in exchange for Four Missing Iranian Diplomats

¶4. (S) According to Neisi, he visited Tehran in mid-July while en route to Meshad, a city in eastern Iran. His source invited Neisi to spend his five-hour layover with him in Tehran before continuing on to Meshad via train. This stopover happened to take place the day before the July 16

Israeli-Hezbollah prisoner swap. Neisi said that as they discoursed on the well-publicized exchange, the source commented that Iran should offer Ron Arad to Israel in exchange for four Iranian diplomats "kidnapped by the Israelis 25 years ago," possibly referring to 1982 reports of disappearances in Lebanon of Ahmad Motevaselian, Seyed Mohsen Mousavi, Taghi Rastegar Moghadam, and Kazem Akhavan. Neisi said that this revelation prompted him to "discreetly" query his source about Arad, and he became convinced that his source had personal knowledge of the current status of the missing pilot.

Neisi: "Arad Still Alive"

¶ 15. (S) Neisi asserted to poloff that his source knew the whereabouts of Arad because of the position he held in airport security. He said that in this position, which he apparently has held for many years, the source has overseen the loading and unloading of flights to and from Damascus. Neisi relayed to poloff his suspicions that in this capacity, his source was the chief (and official) Iranian smuggler of goods, including "carpets, medicines and weapons," from Tehran to Damascus, and that he was in a position to know of Arad's reported arrival in Iran some twenty years ago. The source indicated to Neisi that Arad is still alive and held by a "special, high level intelligence branch" in a building somewhere in Tehran.

Goals: Thwart Ahmadinejad, Rescue Family

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¶ 16. (S) Neisi claimed he could not provide the name of his IRGC source out of personal safety concerns and loyalty to the individual. He told poloff that he hoped the information he relayed could be useful in facilitating a prisoner exchange, but emphasized that his main purpose in providing this information was in some way to thwart the "Khomeini-esque Ahmadinejad regime that systematically persecuted the seven million Ahwazi Arabs in Iran." He added that if he gathered more information, and if it was deemed worth the USD 50,000 he had requested, he would use it to get his wife and young children out of Iran.

Ahwaz-A Ticking Timebomb

¶ 17. (S) As in previous meetings with poloffs (refftel), Neisi remarked on the growing tension in Iran and described the greater Ahwaz region, and its opposition to Persian rule from Tehran as a "ticking timebomb." He said there are no senior level positions in the Iranian military or civilian government for Arabs. (Note: Khalil Abdulkhalil, president of the Kuwaiti branch of the Ahwazian Democratic Solidarity Party disputed this in a September 23 meeting with poloff, saying that there are over 300 Ahwazi Arabs serving in senior IRGC positions. End note). He added that the situation is deteriorating further for Ahwazi Arabs, because of continued "Persianization" of jobs and settlements. On a personal note, Neisi said that his duties at his local Husseiniya (Shi'a worship center) were reduced to the dismay of his Ahwazi parishioners due to the recent, imposed installation of a Persian, IRGC Imam. He also alleged that the IRGC has questioned him on several occasions and prevented his wife from traveling with him either locally or abroad. He added that he has been ordered to cease Arabic language instruction; according to the IRGC such instruction is paramount to sedition.

Iranians Preparing Defenses, North Koreans Advising

¶ 18. (S) Neisi also stated that over the last two years, the road from Ahwaz to Muhammara (unknown) has become replete

with military fortifications in apparent anticipation of an invasion. He said that all military leave requests have been denied for over a year and that Asians, whom he believed to be North Koreans, were embedded as trainers in "all the local IRGC installations in every city."

No Hope for 2009 Presidential Elections

¶ 9. (S) In response to questions on pending presidential elections in 2009, Neisi expressed pessimism that the populace, despite its opposition to President Ahmadi-Nejad would be able to elect a reformer or even a "lesser evil." He said that Ahmadi-Nejad's government was spending a great deal of capital to ensure the continuation of the current regime by marketing contrived successes and limiting the pool of presidential candidates. He lamented that while the poor are getting poorer, the influence and wealth of the country continues to reside with the affluent and powerful Revolutionary Guard leadership. But in separate accounts, both he and Abdulkhalil praised current USG diplomatic efforts, urged continued isolation of Ahmadi-Nejad and his regime, and asserted that the GOI is approaching a "breaking point."

Comment:

¶ 10. (S) Post cannot attest to the credibility of Neisi's account on Arad, but offers it up for further analysis. Neisi will return to Iran within the next few weeks, after which Embassy does not expect further offers of information on Arad's whereabouts. It is likely that Neisi will contact poloffs during his next visit to Kuwait, which will likely take place after the new year. GRPO is fully aware of Neisi's statements to poloff. On human rights concerns, poloff has linked Neisi to local and US-based Ahwazi rights groups. End comment.

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JONES